



City of Newburgh

Office of the City Manager

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Courthouse Burial Ground Working Group

FROM: Ann Kuzmik, Administrative Assistant to the City Manager

RE: Courthouse Burial Ground;
Meeting of April 23, 2008- Summary of Comments

DATE: May 5, 2008

Attendees:

City Manager Jean-Ann McGrane
Doug Mackey NYSHPO/OPRHP
Regina Angelo, Deputy Mayor
Geoffrey Chanin, Corporation Counsel
Yaniyah Pearson, Director of Human Services
Steve Ruelke, City Assessor/City Hall Courthouse Project Coordinator
Ann Kuzmik, Administrative Assistant
Pamela Krizek, Church of St. Mary
Chuck Stewart, Hudson Valley Press
Ed McCarthy, Hudson Valley Press
Richard Peterson, Varick Homes
Mary McTamaney, City Historian
Otis A Dees, A.M.E. Zion Church
Cynthia Fountain (Miles of Smiles)
Rev. Byron Williams, NAACP
Pastor Herman Hubbard, Living in Jesus Ministry
Richard Peterson

I. INTRODUCTIONS:

City Manager Jean-Ann McGrane introduced Doug Mackey of the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), who has been a great resource to the City since the discovery of the first remains.

II. HISTORY:

The actual history of the site predates the City's recorded history; native peoples were living and farming here for centuries. At one time, the lands were attributed to the Hasbrouck family. According to Mackey, the cemetery appears on an 1869 map and not on an 1870 map. Documentation that those interred in the cemetery were relocated, other than brief newspaper accounts indicating the intention to do so, has not yet been found.

The site was a factory in the late 1880s; the Broadway School was built in 1909. The consensus of the group is that the history and heritage of the site should not continue to be disregarded.

III. PROGRESS REPORT:

A. Archeologist

Three archeological firms responded to the RFP for archeologists; Landmark Archeology was chosen and appointed by City Council resolution. Steve Ruelke reported that the firm was selected because of their experience with cemetery work, their excitement about the job, their good 'bedside' manner, and their ability to work with the citizen committee.

Landmark will start Monday, April 28. They will coordinate with the Court Project Manager, Hill, Inc. and with contractors working on the project. They will also work closely with George Garrison and his DPW staff on both excavation and soil screening and examination done by hand

The archeologist will be on site as equipment operators mechanically scrape the soil. A mechanical screen with a 1" diameter will be used, allowing most bone fragments to be seen. If and when remains are found, manual screening will be done. A pile of soil (about 300 cubic yards) removed from the site prior to the discovery of remains will also be screened under the supervision of an archeologist. Any remains or bone fragments will be marked and placed in containers for safe-keeping.

Although the costs of any construction postponement (\$32,000 a day) are a consideration, the group feels that the pure economics of the new Courthouse project should not be the only driving force of this effort.

B. GROUND-PENETRATING RADAR & TOPOGRAPHY

The consensus of all the archeologists was that the use of Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) to identify grave sites or remains would not be worth the time or expense because GPR only shows the difference in underlying landscape. With so much fill on the site, GPR would likely not yield much useful information. Interference from cell phones would also be a problem. Doug Mackey concurred, noting that from the burial site to Robinson Avenue was all fill, and it is likely that the original landscape was a high short

knoll that was built up. When the trench work is done, you can see the original landscape, and there may be a possibility for use of GPR then, he said.

The historical and cultural value of the burial ground is important not just locally, but regionally, state-wide, nationally, and internationally. An effort can be made using computerized drafting to recreate the original topography of the site. Old maps may indicate dimensions, ownership and other information, but they do not show elevation. Data can also be gathered from old tax maps, but archeology is the only way to tell the original elevation.

C. UPDATE: THE ALMS HOUSE CEMETERY:

Recently, the owner of a parcel adjacent to the Alms House Cemetery cut some trees and illegally dumped debris on both City and Town-owned property, including the Alms House Cemetery. Enforcement agencies of the City and Town and the New York State DEC are investigating and seeking remedies and restitution. A work plan is being developed for the responsible party to carry out. So far, the party has expressed a willingness to cooperate. Anyone who has ideas on appropriate restitution for the damage caused by the logging should contact Betsy McKean.

The Alms House Cemetery is west of Lake Street and south of Lake Drive on City property on Snake Hill. The parcel is land-locked by private parcels. Anyone who wishes to visit the Alms House cemetery should ask permission to cross private property before proceeding.

IV. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE REMAINS?

The group proposed that a community tour of the Broadway site be arranged. Safety is a primary concern since this is an active construction site, so such a tour can take place after hours or on a weekend when no construction is going on.

The group also recommended that children from local schools be involved in the project- that it could be a learning experience and an inspiration. It was pointed out that both North Junior High and South Junior High integrate local history into their curriculum- group members offered to contact administrators about possibly including young people in the process. Should it be decided to study the remains, this examination could identify sex, age, gender, health, and hard work. The suggestion was also made to reach out to Lisa Anderson at the New York State Museum to possibly offset study costs.

V. SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS:

A. Research:

The goal of the Research subcommittee is to discover as much as is still extant in municipal, county, state, and private records that could inform Newburgh of the dates of operation of this cemetery, its ownership and management through time, decisions made on its use and abuse through time, and particularly, the names of citizens buried there. The committee is also looking into the proper and respectful investigation of the remains. Corporation Counsel cautioned that we must be aware of the purpose and limitations of our efforts. Those interred in the Burial Ground did not understand or consent to an effort

to exhume and study their remains. We should remain mindful of an obligation to allow them to rest in peace.

The subcommittee continues to investigate the history of the site, including looking at real property records in the County Clerk's office, census records, meeting minutes, and registers of local churches. A possible relationship between the burial ground and St. Patrick's Cemetery on Broadway is also being explored. They also will outreach to academic institutions including Howard University, the New York State Museum, and SUNY- New Paltz.

B. Commemoration:

The commemoration committee is inclined to the view shared by other members of the group which is to suitably re-inter the remains at the Burial Ground site with appropriate memorials and observances. Commemoration should be broadly and generally inclusive since people of diverse and varied backgrounds were interred there. Determining the names of as many people as possible who were buried there is important, as speaking the names of the dead is an important part of the commemoration.

C. Spiritual Healing

Members of the Spiritual Healing Subcommittee visited the Alms House Cemetery site and saw the desecration. The suggestion was made to create caretakers for the Snake Hill site and the Broadway site, and to institute restrictive covenants. Similar protection and recognition should be accorded to other sites that are identified as having received remains that were previously exhumed and relocated. Interested citizens have the opportunity to organize a protective committee to care for these and other neglected burial grounds in the City.

The subcommittee is also exploring the possibility of having a ceremony prior to work beginning again at the Courthouse site at Broadway School.

VI: SUMMARY:

The group has not yet reached a consensus on the disposition of remains- whether they should be removed and re-interred or left in place. Should they be re-interred, a suitable place must be found.

The purpose of any research and what will be done with the findings must be identified. It was pointed out that although the site was marked on early maps as the Colored Burying Ground, it is possible that people of other ethnicities were buried there; with the common thread of poverty. We should do whatever is most expedient and allow all those still interred there to be laid to rest again.

Next Meeting: The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, May 7 at 5 p.m. in the City Manager's Office, 2nd floor, City Hall.